

UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT
NORTHERN DISTRICT OF CALIFORNIA

DAX PIERSON,

Plaintiff,

v.

FORD MOTOR COMPANY,

Defendant.

No. C 06-6503 PJH

**THIRD SUPPLEMENTAL FINAL
PRETRIAL ORDER**

Before the court is plaintiff's motion to exclude certain testing and opinions of defendant's human factors expert, Christine Wood, Ph.D. Having read the parties' papers and carefully considered their arguments, and the relevant legal authority, and good cause appearing, the court hereby GRANTS the motion.

BACKGROUND

This is a product liability case. Plaintiff Dax Pierson was a passenger in a Ford E350 passenger van that was traveling on an icy road in Iowa, skidded off the road, and rolled over and down an embankment. Plaintiff was rendered a quadriplegic as a result of his injuries.

Plaintiff now seeks an order excluding certain tests conducted by defendant Ford Motor Company's human factors expert Christine Wood, Ph.D., and the corresponding opinions she intends to offer based on that testing. Dr. Wood is a Principal Scientist with Exponent Failure Analysis Associates ("Exponent") and the Director of Exponent's human factors practice. She has a Ph.D. in experimental psychology.

At trial, plaintiff intends to present the testimony of his "seat design" or "seat latch"

1 expert, Alan Cantor. Mr. Cantor, an engineer and expert in automotive and aircraft seat
2 design, will testify in support of plaintiff's claim that because of defects that were inherent in
3 the design of the "quick release" latches on the E350's removable seats, some type of
4 visible warning was required to alert passengers in the van when the latch was unlatched
5 (and therefore not secure).

6 Mr. Cantor, who did not provide an expert report, was deposed on December 12,
7 2007. He offered opinions about the bench seat latch design, and about a passenger's
8 ability to perceive, under normal driving conditions, whether the seat is unlatched from the
9 floor. Mr. Cantor stated that it was "more probable than not that an occupant would not
10 perceive the unlatching state on one side versus another."

11 In response to plaintiff's evidence concerning the need for a warning, Ford retained
12 Dr. Wood, to rebut Mr. Cantor's engineering and design opinions that the E350 bench seat
13 equipped with a quick-release latching system requires an in-vehicle warning.

14 On February 22, 2008, Dr. Wood conducted an "expert review" of an exemplar van.
15 In this review, Dr. Wood and another person sat in the positions occupied by plaintiff and
16 one of the other passengers at the time of the crash. Dr. Wood testified in her deposition
17 that the primary purpose of the experiment was for her to "get a feel for whether the seat
18 would move" as the vehicle was "making a circuit of that area and coming to stops and
19 starting again."

20 Dr. Wood, who did not provide an expert report, was deposed for the first time on
21 March 31, 2008. She testified that during the February 22, 2008 expert review, the
22 unlatched edge of the seat pivoted around the latched end of the seat, and that the seat
23 shifted, depending on whether the vehicle was accelerating or decelerating. She
24 concluded that in the traveling that was done in the nearing 2800 miles that plaintiff's band
25 had traveled, "there would be feedback information that the seat wasn't secure."

26 On or about May 15, 2008, Mr. Cantor conducted "rebuttal testing" with the seat
27 unlatched. He concluded that a person seated in plaintiff's position could not feel the seat
28 move under him, in normal driving conditions.

1 On June 10, 2008, the parties filed their pretrial papers. In its proposed witness list,
2 Ford listed Dr. Wood on its witness list as one of its proposed trial witnesses, stating that

3 Dr. Wood is a Human Factors expert and will testify in rebuttal to Mr. Cantor's
4 warning opinions and warning designs, if they are allowed at trial. She will
5 testify regarding the adequacy of the warnings Ford provided concerning the
6 bench seat, the need to prioritize warnings so as to avoid "information
overload," and the inadequate methodology employed by [p]laintiff's expert
Alan Cantor in devising his alternative warning stickers and lighting system.

7 On July 23, 2008, Dr. Wood conducted what Ford characterizes as "rebuttal work" to
8 graphically demonstrate her prior expert review, and to illustrate the opinions she had
9 previously testified to.

10 The following day, July 24, 2008, which was also the day of the final pretrial
11 conference in this case, Ford served plaintiff with the results of the previous day's
12 "demonstration" (which plaintiff refers to as a "test") performed by Dr. Wood. Plaintiff
13 objected to the testing/demonstration on the ground that it was not disclosed until more
14 than 60 days after the close of discovery, and only a month before the date that the trial
15 was originally scheduled to begin. At the pretrial conference, the trial date was continued,
16 as the court determined that the parties were not ready for trial.

17 On August 1, 2008, the court issued its Final Pretrial Order. In that order, the court
18 granted Ford's motion in limine to exclude the "warning" opinions of Alan Cantor to the
19 extent that plaintiff seeks to offer Mr. Cantor to testify regarding the adequacy of Ford's
20 warnings. The court denied the motion to the extent that plaintiff intends to offer Mr. Cantor
21 to testify that the design of the bench seat was such that a warning was needed. On
22 October 15, 2008, plaintiff filed a motion to exclude the July 23, 2008 Wood
23 testing/demonstration as untimely. On November 19, 2008, the court denied plaintiff's
24 motion, largely on the ground that the trial date had been continued to May 11, 2009, such
25 that sufficient time remained to complete discovery as to the testing issue without prejudice
26 to either party. As part of the order denying plaintiff's motion, the court ordered that Dr.
27 Wood be made available for deposition at Ford's expense.

28 On December 11, 2008, while preparing for her deposition, Dr. Wood learned that

1 one scenario she had experienced in her February expert review had not been included in
2 the July demonstration, but was included in Mr. Cantor's May 18, 2008 evaluation. She
3 therefore conducted some limited work to re-confirm her February experience. No photos
4 or video of the experiment was taken, and the van was not instrumented in any way so as
5 to record any data. According to Ford, Dr. Wood learned nothing new from this work.

6 DISCUSSION

7 A. Legal Standard

8 Federal Rule of Evidence 702 permits experts qualified by "knowledge, experience,
9 skill, expertise, training, or education" to testify "in the form of an opinion or otherwise"
10 based on "scientific, technical, or other specialized knowledge" if that knowledge will "assist
11 the trier of fact to understand the evidence or to determine a fact in issue." Fed. R. Evid.
12 702.

13 The proponent of expert testimony bears the burden of establishing by a
14 preponderance of the evidence that the admissibility requirements are met. See Fed. R.
15 Evid. 702, Advisory Committee Notes. Although there is a presumption of admissibility,
16 Daubert v. Merrell Dow Pharms., Inc., 509 U.S. 579, 588 (1993), the trial court is obliged to
17 act as a "gatekeeper" with regard to the admission of expert scientific testimony under Rule
18 702. Id. at 597.

19 Daubert requires a two-part analysis. First, the court must determine whether an
20 expert's testimony reflects "scientific knowledge," whether the findings are "derived by the
21 scientific method," and whether the work product is "good science" – in other words,
22 whether the testimony is reliable and trustworthy. Id. at 590 & n.9, 593. Second, the court
23 must determine whether the testimony is "relevant to the task at hand." Id. at 597.

24 B. Plaintiff's Motion

25 In the present motion, plaintiff argues that Dr. Wood's testimony and testing should
26 be excluded, for two reasons. First, plaintiff asserts that the challenged opinions are
27 "engineering opinions" as opposed to "human factors" opinions. Plaintiff argues that
28 because Dr. Wood is not an engineer, she is not qualified to offer opinions about the need

1 for a warning as a matter of engineering design. In particular, plaintiff contends that based
2 on the court's prior ruling that Mr. Cantor will not be permitted to give "human factors"
3 opinions (i.e., opinions regarding whether Ford's safety warnings were adequate), Dr.
4 Wood should not be permitted to give "engineering opinions" (i.e., opinions regarding the
5 operation of the seat and the van). Ford, on the other hand, argues that Dr. Wood is not
6 providing engineering opinions, but rather is giving human factors opinions.

7 Plaintiff's second argument is that Dr. Wood's tests/demonstrations do not satisfy
8 the indicia of scientific reliability required under Daubert, because the proposed testimony
9 does not reflect scientific knowledge or the application of a scientific method; and do not
10 satisfy the test for relevancy under Daubert, because the demonstrative evidence has no
11 connection to the facts of the case at hand. Ford, on the other hand, asserts that the
12 demonstrations were not "testing" and were simply exercises designed to illustrate the
13 testimony Dr. Wood had already given in her deposition.

14 The court finds that the motion must be GRANTED on the first ground argued by
15 plaintiff. Because Ford designated Dr. Wood as a human factors expert to rebut the
16 opinions of Mr. Cantor regarding the adequacy of the warnings, and because the court
17 previously ruled that Mr. Cantor cannot testify regarding the adequacy of the warnings, the
18 issue of the adequacy of the warnings is no longer in the case. There is, in effect, nothing
19 for Dr. Wood to rebut.

20 CONCLUSION

21 In accordance with the foregoing, the court GRANTS plaintiff's motion to exclude the
22 testing and opinions of Ford's human factors expert, Dr. Christine Wood.

23
24 **IT IS SO ORDERED.**

25 Dated: April 16, 2009



26 PHYLLIS J. HAMILTON
27 United States District Judge
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